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ABSTRACT

Students in the Newport News (Virginia) high schools who are absent from classes frequently without excuses or who are consistently disruptive are transferred from the regular program to an afterschool program that meets at a different site. These transfers are effective for at least 2 months and students may only be rotated back at the end of a semester. The students take four classes, have no free time, and are denied access to their home schools. The purpose of the program, called Project P/R, is to deny truant students the social aspects of schooling that they desire until they improve their behavior. Support for the project was elicited from the police and the judiciary. The program has proved successful: attendance climbed 1.9 percent in just 8 months, in-school suspensions fell 49 percent, the dropout rate declined from 5.9 percent to 3.7 percent, out of school suspensions were down 41 percent, and fewer crimes were committed by students. The program allowed elimination of four teachers handling in-school suspensions (saving $50,000 a year), reduced administrative time devoted to discipline and attendance by 50 percent, and raised teacher morale. A detailed description of the program is appended. (PGD)

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PROJECT P/R - PREVENTION/REHABILITATION
For Truant and Disruptive Students
by Richard A. Stacy

The program we developed in Newport News is called Project P/R - Prevention/Rehabilitation. P/R, by the way is somewhat deceiving, it really isn't a P/R program.

If you have large schools, especially in urban areas, there's a good chance you've experienced some of the same problems we've experienced with truant and disruptive students. Truant here is not limited to the student who doesn't come at all, but it also includes students who come almost every day but hardly ever attend any classes. They come almost every day -- some of these kids get up every morning religiously, catch the bus and ride 10 to 15 miles to school and then wander all day long. They come and enjoy breakfast, lunch and the social aspects of high school but you can never find them in class. If you want to find them you will have to check the cafeteria at breakfast time or at lunch time or when they're loading the buses in the afternoon. While other students are in class, many of these students are out in the neighborhood, robbing, stealing, reeking havoc on the neighborhood. If they do attend class, quite often they're disruptive in the classroom.

Do you have any of these? This is the student that is targeted by this program. Unlike Blair, I did conceive of this idea out of sheer frustration, after a great number of years fighting these problems.

There are very few disruptive students who are in class every day, on time, 6 or 7 periods a day. A student almost has to miss some classes regularly or at least be tardy to class regularly in order to be effectively disruptive. He can't be effectively disruptive if he's in class everyday on time. What we're saying in Newport News with this program is that we're not going to provide a "hang out" for youngsters. You want to come to school and enjoy the social aspects of high school, enjoy breakfast and lunch -- fine, but you've got to go to class to do it.

Now we tried a number of programs. We've tried everything you can conceive of -- from doing nothing, to conferencing with parents, suspending students and withholding credits. I guess that is the most popular program that I hear about throughout the country, whereas a student misses X number of days he fails the class. In my opinion, that program is doomed to failure from the start, because it totally disregards the fact that most truants are already failing.

I did a survey at Warwick five or six years ago to

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determine what portion of those students who were failing were failing because they were not in class. Sixty seven percent (67%), according to teachers, failed because they weren't there. Then, what do you do with a student after he reaches that magic number -- five days or ten days, or whatever -- and he fails for the semester or marking period or whatever? What do you do with him? Anybody who thinks that students are going to go to class for six to eight weeks or twelve to fourteen weeks after failing a course is not thinking clearly. They're not going to go and you can't get them there. I wouldn't go! You wouldn't go! You are in a class for a semester and after two weeks you failed that class with no hope of passing, how many of you would go to that class for the next sixteen weeks? My guess is that none of you would. I wouldn't.

In Newport News we say to students who have reached the magic number, "You cannot remain in the regular program. If you want to stay in school, and we want you to, you must go to another program -- a program at another site called Project P/R -- a different time, a different setting. The program is based on the theory that most students that come to school want to be there. Now they may not be there for the same reasons you want them to be there, but they want to be there. If they didn't want to be there, they wouldn't come at all. Some don't want to be and don't come at all. That's a relatively small number. We think that the desire to be in school, to be with their friends and enjoy whatever they want to enjoy, is so great that if we threaten to take that away from them, they will come to school and go to class every day on time.

I wanted to call the program Project "Zapped" but they wouldn't let me. They thought that didn't have a "positive ring". I was so frustrated at the time I conceived of this idea that I didn't care whether it had a positive ring or not. I wanted something that would work and this one works and works beautifully. By the way, it took me more than a year to convince teachers, administrators, and the school board that it would work. Here is this guy with some "hair brained" idea that had not been researched. I wish I could tell you I earned a doctoral degree in developing this program. Maybe the fact that it had not been researched might have something to do with the fact that it's working. Here's this guy with this "hair brained" idea and wants the school board to commit the city of Newport News to it. It also took a change in the superintendent's post. Without that change it might not have gotten off the ground. If you have a tough superintendent you might be able to pull it off. If you have a superintendent who is a little more worried about keeping the "lid on", you can forget it.

Here's how our program works:

If a student accumulates more than five (5) unexcused absences in two (2) or more classes in a semester or if he is consistently disruptive in a semester, he is transferred from the regular program to an afternoon program that meets from 2-5:30 p.m. Now, that's by design. I wanted the timing to be as inconvenient as possible. I did not want them in the area during the regular school day. We get out at 1:45 p.m., they go at 2:00. The program is in another setting. It is not based in any of the four high schools in Newport News. It is in a separate setting. While he's there, he must remain there at least two (2) months and cannot be rotated out until the end of the semester. If a youngster goes there in early December, he can't get two months in before the end of the semester in January so he stays until June. If a student goes in September or October and does everything he is expected to do while he is there, he comes out in January.

It's a tough program. If you're not serious about it, there's no point in even dealing with it. My feeling is that if you have a tough problem, you've got to have a tough solution. You and I know that there's nothing tougher than attendance and discipline, nothing.

The student in P/R must take four (4) of five (5) classes, English, math, social studies, health and career decision making. Every youngster takes four of those five classes. We don't serve any meals. There are no study halls. There are no free periods. The students are picked up about 1:30. The first class starts at 2:00. He has a five (5) minute break between classes and his fourth class ends at 5:30 and he goes home. That's it! During the time he is there he is not allowed on the campuses of the four high schools, during, before, or after school. We thought that might be a problem, that they might roam all over the area, not true. We took steps to get ahead of that before we instituted the program.

We elicited the support of the Newport News Police department. We said we're tired of these youngsters, roaming around creating havoc all over the city. We're doing something about it. We need your help. Help us by picking up youngsters who are on the street during the school day. They said they would.

We also talked to a juvenile judge. We said to the judge, help us by requiring parents to come and meet with you. We're not asking you to send these youngsters off anywhere, just require the parents to come and meet with you. He said he would.

We placed one staff car in each of the four high schools. (All have staff aides.) We use those cars to patrol the vicinity of the schools. We had a problem the first month or so. After that, the cars are just sitting there. We rarely use them.

The police department picked up 88 students the first year, which was 1984-85. Seven of those repeated so those seven families had to meet with the juvenile judge.

Just before I left I got some current figures. As of January 31, 1986, (which is the second year of the program) the police picked up 22 youngsters. There were no repeaters. If you're a high school principal dealing with truancy, that has to be impressive.

Let me tell you some of the other things that we've been able to accomplish with this program. Attendance at Warwick High School last year (the program began October 22, 1984) was up 3.87%. If you're an urban school principal, that's a big figure. We were at 87.27% 1983-84, 91.14% last year. Warwick High School has not had an attendance figure above 90% in the recent history of the school. For the city (the four high schools) the attendance was up 1.91%, that's with a high school population of about 7800 students -- 1.91% -- that's a big figure. Now that's in just eight (8) months of the program! This year's figures will be even more impressive.

In School Suspensions, I don't know whether you have ISS people in your schools or not but if you do have, my guess is that most of the students in there are there because they are tardy, they're not in class, they get caught in the halls, or they don't come at all. True? In School Suspensions at Warwick High School were down 69% last year -- that's from 879 in 1983-84 to 270 84-85. That's got to be impressive to a high school principal who is dealing with truancy. For the city of Newport News, ISS was down 49%. With a population of 7800 students, we went from 2920 ISS in 83-84 to 1491 in 84-85.

Drop out rate, now this is really a bonus. We thought that if we could just hold our own as far as the drop out rate was concerned we'd be happy. The drop out rate in Newport News was 5.9 per 100 students in 1983-84. We went from 5.9 in 83-84 to 3.7 in 84-85. That's got to be impressive! Most of the youngsters who dropped out were 17, 17 1/2, and 18 year old ninth graders who weren't going anywhere in the regular high school program. The chances of those youngsters making it through high school are almost nil. You know that, I know that, they know that. They need

to be in another program. Many of these youngsters went into GED programs, got a GED or they will get a GED and get a job and go to work. To have those youngsters hang around your building and reek havoc on everybody in the area is absolutely asinine.

Out of School Suspensions at Warwick were down 48% last year, from 264 to 138. For the city, down 41%, from 1033 to 615. That's got to be impressive.

This program (P/R) cost about $33,000 to operate. We eliminated the four (4) ISS teachers ($90,000). We didn't need them. This is a net savings of $50,000 annually. It's not going to cost the taxpayers a dime, it's going to save the taxpayers some money.

The number of crimes committed during school hours by school age persons is down in Newport News. There are six or eight cities in our area and Newport News was the only city that showed a drop in crime rate by high school age youngsters during the day last year. The chief of police didn't tell me I could take any credit for that but I'm going to take a little and here is why. The chief would probably tell you that some of the long standing programs are finally taking hold. Let me tell you what we have done. Over the years we have picked up students from all over the city, dropped those students in areas of the four high schools. They can't go home, they've got to find somewhere to be for six hours of the day. If you don't allow them to walk around the halls and spend all of their time in the building, they've got to go out into the neighborhood. That's when the crimes are committed, and these are the youngsters who are committing them. You know that. They're committing those crimes while other youngsters are in school. We don't pick those kids up in the morning. They stay at home until 1:30. That may mean in every neighborhood there may be two or three youngsters that you would like to see off in school, but to have two or three young people that are potential troublemakers in a neighborhood is not the same as having 50 or 60 in the vicinity of Warwick High School. So we think the crime rate is down because the youngsters are at home. You get those students all together in one location and the potential to cause trouble is unbelievable.

Now all these things are remarkable. I know you have to factor out my own biases -- it's my program. Even so, you factor that out and I still say you will find it impressive.

Here's an intangible that impresses me. I have had two (2) calls from the neighborhood this year -- that's down from

25 to 30 calls normally -- two calls, and both came in September. I bet there's not a principal here that's had that few if you're in an urban area.

We estimate a 50% reduction in administrative time spent on discipline and attendance. If you have three or four assistant principals in your building, my guess is that every one of them is up to here dealing with attendance, every one of them. There is no escape from it. That 50% reduction in administrative time, we're utilizing in the classroom. At Warwick High School every administrator in the building spends one class period a day in the classroom. I challenge you to find that anywhere. The time we saved from discipline and attendance we spend in the classroom. You've been trying to get your assistant principals in the classroom for years, I'll bet, and they keep asking you, "How am I going to get in there with a line of students I 've got to see", and most of those students in that line are there because they were tardy or absent.

Teacher morale is at an all time high. For the first time in the history of Newport News teachers can say, "Johnny, if you don't come to my class or if you are disruptive in my class, you won't be here", and mean it. Teachers have been saying that for years but with no clout.

One last thing. We assigned approximately 250 students from Warwick High School to this program. One hundred eleven have returned to the regular program. Of the 111 that have returned to the regular program, 11 have gone back to P/R, ten percent!

PROJECT (PR) PREVENTION/REHABILATION

(TRUANT AND DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROGRAM)

PROJECT (PR) PREVENTION/REHABILITATION (TRUANT AND DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROGRAM)

RATIONALE:

The problems of truancy and drop out are identified as the major problems confronting the public schools throughout the country. These are problems with which the public schools and the community at large must deal. Survey after survey report a high correlation between habitual truancy and the school drop-out rate and disruptive behavior.

It is a foregone conclusion that when time is lost from school, there is oviously a reduction in the student's level of academic performance/achievement.

Most crimes during school hours are committed by out of school youths on Newport News streets. It is a long established fact that it costs more per pupil to rehabilitate a student criminal than it does to educate a student. Consequently, prevention is more cost effective than rehabilitation.

Therefore, it is more appropriate for homes, schools, court systems, and all other social agencies to pool their resources to plan, develop, coordinate, and implement programs to prevent acts of truancy and unacceptable behavior of school age children.

GOAL:

The Newport News Public Schools has an overall three fold goal: (1) to enforce the compulsory school attendance law and return truant students to school, (2) to significantly reduce the truancy/drop-out rate, and (3) to provide an alternative school setting/educational program for high school students who cannot adjust to the regular school program.

SCOPE:

Project P/R is geared to high school students living in the City of Newport News.

PARTICIPATING AGENCIES/INSTITUTIONS:

The ultimate success level of this program depends upon the cooperation and active participation of agencies and institutions in the community at large.

The major participants are:

- The Home
- The Newport News Public Schools
- The Newport News Police Department (Youth Bureau)
- The Juvenile Court System

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:

The participating agencies and institutions have specific roles and responsibilities in relation to the successful operation of the program.

I. The Home

The Home shall provide the basic needs of the child, including access to an education. The parent(s) shall accept the responsibility to convey to the child the expectation of regular school attendance and code of behavior and to take appropriate action when truancy or an unacceptable behavior pattern is brought to their attention.

The school social worker will work with parents and students if other assistance is needed from outside agencies.

II. The Newport News Public Schools

A. Logistics

1. Location - One central location, Deer Park (Point Option classrooms), so that we have more flexibility in scheduling students for instruction and so that it can be more easily coordinated.

2. Hours - After regular school hours from 2:00— 5:30. After school hours provide the possibility of securing instructors without having to add additional persons to the payroll.

3. Textbooks — Will be turned in to the home school when students leave for the alternative program. Those textbooks required will be issued at Project P/R.

4. Transportation - Provide area pickup points for downtown and Denbigh area so that questions of equitable treatment to those assigned be addressed.

B. Staffing

1. Coordinator - Pay a supplement to an assistant principal, or a similar level employee, to coordinate the program. The supplement would be for the extra hours and the extra responsibility.

2. Instructors - Pay will be on an hourly basis. Instructors will be added only as needed.

3. One staff aide and one clerk will be provided.

4. Assign 1 staff aide per school to take defensice driving and, using a driver's education car, patrol the community served by the school. He would be instructed to pick up

students who are supposed to be in school and return them to school.

C. Instructional Program

Offer instruction in English, mathematics, social studies, health and career decision making. All students assigned will take 4 of the 5 classes at the most appropriate level feasible. The instructional program for each student will have to be individualized based upon the student's course needs. Because new students could be added at any time during the year, felxibility of program is essential.

D. Procedural Safeguards (Entry/Exit)

1. Procedures for assigning students — When a student has more than 5 unexcused absences for a marking period in two or more classes (note: 3 tardies 1 absence), that student will be assigned to the P/R program following application of due process proceedings required in the suspension of students and the completion of the appeals process if applicable. Once assigned, a student will have to remain in the program a minimum of 2 months and will be able to return to the regular program at the end of the semester during which the 2 month period ends. To return to the regular program at that time, the student must have demonstrated acceptable academic performance, conduct, and acceptable attendance (to be defined as no unexcused absences during the time in the alternative program).

   NOTE: Days missed because of an out of school suspensions will be charged as unexcused but no student will be put over the limit by a suspension even if the number of days suspended is more than the maximum. In such a case, the student will reach the maximum at the end of the suspension and any further days of absence will place him/her over the limit.

2. Determination of Excused vs. Unexcused — It is recognized that certain absences cannot be avoided. Students will not be penalized in these cases. Excused absences are classified as those that have resulted from conditions beyond the control of students, parents, or the school and will not be counted in the tally of absences outlined in the procedures. Such conditions include personal illness, severe illness or death in the family, religious observance or required court appearances.

   Athletic events, field trips student government activites an other functions sanctioned by the school are normal school activities and students are considered to be present.

   Unexcused absences are any absences that:

   a. are not classified as allowable.

   b. have not received prior approval from the building administrator.

c. are accumulated as a result of not following procedure in case of illness.

d. are accumulated through unexcused tardies.

e. are not defined in this policy and, in the judgment of the building administrator, need to be classified as such.

In case of illness for one or two days, a note signed by the parent or guardian shall be required to verify the reason for the absence within three (3) school days following return to class.

In case of illness for more than two days, the parent or guardian must contact the school in person or by telephone explaining the nature of the illness, and at the discretion of the building administrator, furnish a note from a doctor.

A parent or guardian may request approval for other absences in advance by filing a written request with the principal or designee. All approved advance requests for absences will be signed by the principal or designee and filed for reference. Failure to seek approval in advance will result in the absences counting as unexcused.

3. Admission Procedures – In addition to the due process procedures, the parents will be notified by certified letter on the 3rd day following the 6th unexcused absence in 2 or more classes. Unless there is an acceptable explanation from the parent resulting in a determination that the final absence is excused, or there is a successful appeal, the student will be assigned to the alternative program effective the 7th school day after the mailing of the letter (the 10th day following the 6th unexcused absence). Enrollment procedures will be similar to those now used for Point Option students, with students still assigned to the home school's roster.

E. Students who are consistently disruptive will be assigned to Project P/R upon the recommendation of the principal and approval of the Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Services. Duration of P/R assignment will be not less than the minimum time required for truant students.

Appeal to the Principal of Designee

1. Parent/student appeals must be communicated, in writing, to the principal or designee within five (5) days of the notification of assignment to the alternative program of the decision becomes final.

2. Within five (5) days of the appeal, the principal will make a ruling based on policy guidelines. This decision will be in writing with a copy sent to the parent, student and subject matter teacher(s).

Appeal to the Superintendent or Designee

1. Parent/student appeals must be communicated, in writing, to the superintendent within seven (7) days of the school's decision or the decision of the school becomes final.

III. The Newport News Police Department

The Police Department (Youth Bureau) shall cooperate with other participating agencies to facilitate school attendance and assist building administrators when incidents of unusual behavior develop.

Truants or suspected truants on the streets during school hours in the community will be approached by a police officer. The subsequent action shall be as follows:

1. The police will question the student relative to his/her absence from school. If a judgment is made that further information is needed, the school is contacted prior to further action.

2. If the student is found or suspected to be a truant, he/she is transported via a police vehicle to the school.

3. The police officer will initiate a contact (telephone call) with the home. If parent cannot be readily reached, the school personnel staff follows through with the parental contact.

4. The student is issued a warning with copies forwarded to the school and mailed to the home.

5. The student is expected to be returned to the home school that day or no later than the next school day.

6. The home school will be contacted by the attendance officer to determine the student's presence or absence.

IV. The Juvenile Court System

The Juvenile Judge will be notified by the police department when a student has been picked up a second time. The Judge will require the parents of that student to appear before him at a time designated by the Judge.